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ABSTRACT

Overrepresentation of minorities in special education has been a problem for 25 years and was targeted by the Office of Civil Rights as an initiative in 1993. One rural southeastern state examined its special education process from referral to placement to determine if procedures significantly overidentified or underidentified a particular racial group. Ten percent of the students from each of 25 school districts' special education tracking lists were selected to create a pool of 750 potential subjects. From this group, the 341 students that were assessed and referred for special education services for learning problems became the sample for the study. Results indicated that African Americans were overrepresented in programs for mild mentally retarded students, underrepresented in programs for specific learning disabled students, and overrepresented in the initial referral stage. The disproportionate representations of African Americans are findings consistent with results elsewhere in the literature, and indicate that variables such as attitude or expectations toward various races might be explored in future research. Strategies to determine the real causes of overrepresentation of minorities in special education are recommended for state, district, and higher education levels. Contains 16 references. (TD)

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THE DISPROPORTIONATE REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES IN RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT

Overrepresentation of minorities in special education has long been a problem. One of the first discussions documenting the issue of disproportionate representation of African-Americans, American Indians, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans in classes for students with mental retardation was presented by Lloyd Dunn (1968). Court cases such as Diana v. State Board of Education (1970) and Guadalupe v. Tempe Elementary School (1972) were forerunners that addressed this issue by mandating the types of tests given to students (non-verbal) as well as the manner that tests were administered (primary language) (Reschly, Kicklighter & McKee, 1988). These proceedings began litigation concerning the overrepresentation of minorities in special education that continues to the present (Heller, Holtman & Messick, 1982; National Council on Disability, 1992; United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR), 1990). Reschley (1988) in his research on overrepresentative numbers of minorities in special education, contends this problem is one of the most controversial legal issues in special education and related services (p. 316). The impact of disproportionate numbers of minority students on special education programs has influenced both federal legislation (MacMillan, Hendrick & Watkins, 1988; Reschley, Kicklighter & McKee, 1988) and Department of Education policies (Winget, 1991; NASDE, 1991; Reschley, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1991).

Historically, the overrepresentation of minorities in programs for students with disabilities has been debated for 25 years, yet many of the problems cited by Dunn still plague the field of special education today. Since the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) targeted this issue as one of their initiatives beginning in 1993, many state departments of education and school districts have begun to examine special education program enrollments in an attempt to be proactive regarding the overidentification of minorities in programs for students with disabilities.

One southeastern state examined its special education process from referral to placement in an attempt to determine any procedures which significantly overidentified or underidentified any racial group. This paper will discuss this southeastern state's analysis of the data and give suggestions that other states and districts can use to develop their own comprehensive plan for addressing this complexed problem.

Procedures

Twenty-five school systems in a rural southern state were randomly selected to obtain a representative sample of special education referrals. School systems with 95%

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or greater of any racial population were not included in the sample. Review of State Department of Education data indicated that in special education programs there was overrepresentation of African-Americans in programs for students identified a mild mentally retarded while programs for students classified as specific learning disabled were overrepresented with Caucasian. Each of the selected 25 districts were requested to submit a copy of the tracking list of all students referred and assessed for special education programming, whether determined eligible or ineligible for services during the 1992 school year. Ten percent of the students from each of the 25 school's special education tracking list were selected to create a pool of 750 potential subjects. The school systems were requested to provide specific data from the tracking forms for the selected students. From this group of 750, those students assessed and referred for special education services for learning problems (341) were identified as the sample for this study.

Data Collection

Two documents from each student's record were requested to be copied for data collections purposes: the Student Referral Form, and the Multidisciplinary Eligibility Determination Committee Report. The state department of education mandated the use of these forms for the purpose of documenting the referral/eligibility process; therefore, all 25 districts reported consistent information on students referred for special education. Documents sent to the researchers were reviewed to determine whether the student was referred for a mild learning problem. Only the records that indicated learning problems were used as data sources.

A Student Profile Form (SPF) was designed as a guide to assist in gathering specific data related to student information, assessment, evaluation, and eligibility determination of the special education categories of MMR and SLD. The type information selected was chosen as areas suspected of leading to disproportionate representation of minorities in special education programs (Reschley & Ward, 1991; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; McLeskey, Waldron, Wornhoff, 1990; Ortiz & Yatesm 1983). The SPF was used to document general student information, such as age, grade, gender, race, and whether the student received free/reduced lunch and was enrolled in a Title 1 program. Student free/reduced lunch status had to be gathered from individual parents since that information is considered confidential. Student free/reduced lunch eligibility was one indicator of socio-economic status, whereas Title 1 gave information about the school system's attempt to serve the student in general education prior to special education referral.

Results

The findings of this study indicated that there was a disproportionate overrepresentation of African-American students identified as mild mentally retarded and an underrepresentation of students identified as specific learning disabled in special education programs. Eligibility criteria or student characteristics were found to

significantly impact the eligibility/non-eligibility identification of students as MMR or SLD. Several general conclusions are warranted:

1. The disproportionate overrepresentation of African-Americans in MMR placements and underrepresentation of SLD placements are findings consistent with results presented elsewhere in the literature and may have implications that go beyond the examination of criteria, by race and by placement category. Variability such as attitude or expectations toward various races are hard to measure, but might be explored in future research.

2. The statistical significance of Adaptive Behavior Scale data for the students identified as MMR in comparison to the ineligible group revealed that African-American students were just as likely to be given the test and determined MMR or ineligible; however, Caucasian students were more likely to be given the assessment and determined MMR or not given the assessment and determined ineligible. The lack of documentation on the actual adaptive behavior test results made it difficult to substantiate previous research findings that found disparity between races regarding adaptive behavior deficits.

3. The absence of significance regarding the presence of a severe discrepancy by race and placement was surprising considering state and national statistics on the prevalence of severe discrepancies in SLD eligibility.

4. The findings of this study indicated that the sample population was higher in African-American (39.54) students and lower in Caucasian (60.41) students when compared to the total special education or total state public school population. This showed that there was an overrepresentation of African-Americans in the initial referral stage.

Recommendations

Educators are naive to believe that a problem which has continued to manifest itself in various ways for 25 years will be remedied overnight. There are aspects of this situation which have been thoroughly researched, yet research needs to be conducted in other areas to gain clarity about specific aspects of the problem of overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs. Rather than being paralyzed by the magnitude of the situation and those factors which tend to diversify the solution, strategies can be attempted which would be in the circle of influence for districts, states or colleges and universities.

State Level-

1. Conduct a statewide analysis of child count data to examine trends by demographic areas, placement, gender and ethnicity.

2. Once data are collected, decide how involved the state will become in mandating

certain remedies (i.e. asking districts to submit a proposal to address aspects of the overrepresentation problem or changing eligibility criteria which tend to overidentify certain ethnic groups) to districts with problems.

3. Examine data based on the observed population in special education programs verses the expected enrollment based on national averages to decide whether the data are truly a portrayal of significant disproportionality or a statistical problem based on enrollment.

District Level-

1. Conduct a system-wide analysis of student identification process from referral to placement on a district level and on a building level.

2. Identify what area in the process seems to promote an over or underidentification of any ethnic group within the special education program.

3. Propose a plan to systematically work toward relieving the problem. Include a goal oriented approach with time lines which target dates.

4. Consider appointing a committee for eligibility which reflects the population of the school and the ethnicity of the individual being considered for special education services.

5. Promote quality evaluation at every point, especially in the area of I.Q. and adaptive behavior scales for students suspected as mentally retarded.

6. Enlist the community as much as possible as part of the solution to this problem.

7. Promote a unified system of education for all students.

Higher Education Level-

1. Continue to place emphasis on the recruitment of diverse populations of students within preservice and higher level education programs.

2. Infuse effective multicultural teaching practices into teacher education programs so that future teachers are knowledgeable about culturally sensitive or culturally responsive teaching practices with diverse learners (Ewing, 1995).

Finally, it would be difficult to express the impact of this issue more eloquently than William Raspberry when he said that we need to keep in mind that "problems persist after enemies are vanquished and diverting energy into battles with real or imagined enemies often prevents or delays solutions" (cited in Kauffman, 1993, p.6). What are the real enemies in this battle and what are the imagined? When and if we can discern between the two, the greatest gain of all toward remedy will be achieved for the students who are the ones often forgotten in the shuffle of bureaucracy.

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